

The Influence of Christian Orthodox Thought on Stanislavski's Theatrical Legacy (7193 words)

Gabriela Curpan

*Theatre and Performance Department, Goldsmiths, University of London, London,
United Kingdom*

g.curpan@gold.ac.uk

An experienced Romanian professional actress, Gabriela Curpan completed her PhD in Goldsmiths, University of London, and is a Senior Lecturer in Acting at University of Wolverhampton. Her practice as research explores various spiritual ways of preparing towards experiencing the creative state on the stage, as envisioned by Konstantin Stanislavski.

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Expressed through many Orthodox concepts, such as 'soul', 'heart', 'love', 'beauty' and 'truth', scattered throughout all his writings, Stanislavski's personal religious feelings seemed constantly to have shaped his life-long sense of an artistic spirituality. Yet, in spite of this presence, the Orthodox connections appear to be neither properly analysed nor fully explained. Therefore, this paper strives to identify and reflect upon how such generally ignored but key Orthodox ideas might have had a crucial influence on shaping Stanislavski's 'system'.

Keywords: the 'system', Orthodox Faith, love, beauty, truth, spiritual
ladder, soul, incarnation, morality

Introduction

As a practitioner, through my practice as research, I was looking for ways of preparation towards experiencing what Stanislavski defines as 'the creative state'¹. The main questions I ended up with were: Does this creative state become available merely by acquiring skills through a realist-psychological technique, emphasizing no more than a score of physical actions and limited to a Cartesian body-mind way of artistic creativity? Or, on the contrary, does it necessitate a more spiritually orientated type of work? Moreover, by following a spiritual path, can the actor be enabled to reach deeper and subtler awareness, accessible when connecting body and mind to touch upon what a

¹ According to Mel Gordon, Stanislavski was mesmerised by "certain qualities" all the great actors he admired seemed to share: "there was a kind of aura around them on the stage" (Gordon, 1988: 28). He refers to this "inspired artistic condition" as "the Creative State of Mind". Similar to "love, this state appeared to be instinctive yet, remained a passion beyond the boundaries of any mental control". For most of the actors, such passion "could not be summoned at a moment's notice" in so far as "it vanished as unexpectedly as it came". Only artists of great genius look as though they "intuitively" know "how to 'create' it on the stage" (Ibid., 1988: 29).

believer would consider to be the soul/spirit? In addition, could such awareness go hand in hand with the necessary technical aspects of an actor's work?

To find viable answers, it was only sensible for me to begin with a theoretical research into the 'system'. When reading *An Actor's Work* (Benedetti's translation), Stanislavski's words sounded highly spiritual to me. I remember that, at the time, not being able to put the book aside, I was completely amazed, and constantly asked myself how it is possible that other readers, in general, cannot see how profoundly spiritual Stanislavski's ideas are. However, later on, when looking for relevant evidence to support my incipient writing, I was confounded to discover that I could find none. Moreover, there was no specific explanation regarding a possible spiritual intention.

Intrigued, I initiated a search for the exact words: 'soul' and 'spiritual', only to discover that in Jean Benedetti's translation these were not used at all. At that point, I had to question my own objectivity in understanding Stanislavski's words. Therefore, I proceeded to read the book again. This time, its effect on me was very similar to the first; despite the missing terms, once more I found its ideas very spiritual in their teachings. Yet, I could not ignore the fact that, regardless of my feelings, there was no direct evidence to be found. In the end, it was this struggle that led me to think about a possibly unnoticed Christian Orthodox influence.

After reflecting for a while on this strange phenomenon, it occurred to me that the reason I perceived a spiritual message where none was apparent might have had something to do with my personal upbringing. Like Stanislavski, I was born, baptised, and raised in the Orthodox Faith. In addition, as a citizen of a former communist country (Romania), under Ceausescu's dictatorship, I went through similar experiences while living in a society controlled by the state that practiced a form of censorship indistinguishable from the Russian Stalinist one. On the one hand, being familiar with

the many Orthodox terms and principles that Stanislavski uses in his writings, it was only natural to relate to a spiritual perspective. On the other hand, due to the nearly twenty years of dealing with writings restrained by censorship, grasping the meaning hidden between the lines was second nature to me².

It is highly possible that the absence of an explanation is a direct consequence of this communist censorship. However, at the same time, considering that, in the nineteenth century, most of the Russian theatre practitioners were born and raised in the Orthodox Faith, it is also possible that these principles were common knowledge, making an explanation redundant. Nevertheless, due to the fact that today, in Britain, this faith is not a widely practiced, well known, or clearly understood denomination, such knowledge is no longer common, and an exposition becomes critical.

Later on, when approaching various works, my theory was strengthened by the discovery that all Stanislavski's letters, as well as other writings (*Creating a Role* or *An Actor's Handbook*), contain plenty of the spiritual words missing from Benedetti. Another source, to support my reasoning, was Anatoli Smeliansky's interview, as featured in *Stanislavski and the Russian Theatre*³. Here, he gives an account of a subtle presence of religious thought in the 'system' converted into acting ideas⁴. Indeed, a

² Sharon Marie Carnicke warns that, "readers who take Stanislavsky at his word without seeking his deeper subtext can easily mistake his texts as singularly interested in Psychological Realism" (2009: 106). She asserts that, "like subtext in a play, the richness of Stanislavski's ideas can be found only reading between the lines, an accommodation made necessary" by the new ideology demands and "the culture of Soviet censorship" (Carnicke, 2009: 94).

³ This documentary was produced by Copernicus Films in 2011 and directed by Michael Craig.

⁴ Smeliansky argues that, "Stanislavski's understanding of the theatre is how to combine his deepest religious feelings with theatre. That is the conversion". He cautions the theatre practitioner that, without a prior comprehension of this conversion, it is impossible to grasp what Stanislavski "did and his understanding of acting [...], of the

religious conversion can be discovered throughout all Stanislavski's books, being translated into his constant advice for the actor to observe a correct moral behaviour while creating and maintaining "a liturgical mood backstage"⁵ (Stanislavski, 2010: 572). It is also reflected by his relentless encouragements towards love for art or passion for beauty and truth to incarnate the soul of the character, alongside the need for a spiritual growth, envisioned as climbing a symbolic ladder towards perfection⁶.

Yet, as noted above, in Benedetti's translation, there is no evidence of a religious presence. With the exception of when conveying the goal of the 'system' to support "the creation of the life of the human spirit in a role" (Ibid., 2010: 19), crucial terms such as 'soul' or 'spiritual' seem to disappear completely. The only time when the word 'soul' can be found is in the extracts from the 'Original Draft Preface'. Here, Stanislavski acknowledges the soul and its fundamental significance for the art of the stage.

Whilst constantly and relentlessly repeated throughout the entire book, as in a mantra, the expression "the life of the human spirit" becomes, in this preface, "the life of the human soul", which cannot be created or known through the brain, but "through feelings" (Stanislavski, 2010: xxiv). This slightly different formulation that includes the religious idea of the soul in the creative processes, and which might be crucial for

relationship between the actors and the audience, his understanding of serving the society" (Craig, 2011).

⁵ This 'liturgical mood' is linked with Stanislavski's idea that the stage and the theatre should become "sacred altars on which" the actor "should lay his offerings" (1967: 15). As Gordon asserts, in Stanislavski's case, although not clearly expressed in his writings, "everything that related to his art practice was surrounded by an aura of the sacred", including "his constant fidgeting" which, according to Gordon, "had a thoughtful and inner religious component" (2010: 20).

⁶ All these concepts ('morality', 'love', 'beauty', 'truth', 'soul', 'incarnation', 'ladder', 'spiritual growth') are, in fact, religious ideas converted into artistic instruments—for, as Rose Whyman argues, undoubtedly "there are religious or spiritual connotations to the way Stanislavski talks about acting" (Whyman, 2008: 77).

understanding how the ‘system’ works towards experiencing the creative state, appears nowhere else in *An Actor’s Work* and thus can be easily overlooked.

While finding “Benedetti’s translation very readable”, Maria Shevtsova points out that, unfortunately, “it does not quite fully convey the emotional principle embedded in Stanislavski’s research” in so far as, “too frequently, he uses ‘mind’ for Stanislavski’s ‘*dusha*’ that, in Russian, refers to both ‘heart’ and ‘soul’” (Shevtsova, 2010: 173). Moreover, due to this replacement, ‘mental’ also covers “the adjectives *dushevnoye* and *dukhovnoye* from the corresponding two nouns”. Shevtsova warns against the suggestion that “Stanislavski envisaged the actor as more rationally driven and in-the-head in his/her practice than is implied by his continual emphasis on the actor as a constantly developing emotional and spiritual being” (Ibid., 2010: 173).

In contrast to Benedetti’s translation, not only replacing ‘soul’ with ‘mind’, but also eliminating ‘spiritual’ completely, other works (attributed to Stanislavski) contain clearer references to the spiritual nature of theatre as art⁷. For example, let us consider *On the Art of the Stage*, which is based on a collection of lectures/discourses given by Stanislavski between 1918 and 1922 at the Opera Studio, as translated and edited by David Magarshack. In this book, the word ‘spiritual’ is very much present, whilst ‘soul’, although not disappearing completely, tends to be replaced with ‘heart’, as in “the living treasures—the hearts of men” (Stanislavski, 1967: 97).

As opposed to Benedetti’s choice, Magarshack’s option to use ‘heart’ instead of ‘soul’ does not eliminate a spiritual dimension, for whenever referring to “heart,” surely Stanislavski cannot be alluding to the literal human organ. More likely, he has in mind

⁷ Although heavily edited and separated in two books instead of a single one (as Stanislavski intended), Elizabeth Hapgood’s older translations largely include these crucial religiously/spiritually connected terms.

the Orthodox notion of ‘heart’ that depicts both the human organ and the divine presence of Christ—love, being thus utterly spiritual in meaning⁸.

Faced with such opposing choices of translating his words, I as a practitioner wonder why there is this huge difference between various writings, all of them attributed to Stanislavski. Why do some of these books seem constantly to emphasize such critical terms as ‘soul’ and ‘spiritual’, while others totally disregard them? Unfortunately, the excision of nearly all religiously originated words from Benedetti’s translations can only perpetuate the initial misinterpretation of the ‘system’, probably caused by a censorship supporting the Russian communist ideology.

Unless possessing knowledge of Orthodox theology, it becomes impossible for any practitioner even to be made aware of a religious conversion (as highlighted by Smeliansky), crucial for understanding/reaching the creative state. Therefore, what remains visible appears to be connected only with the technical aspects and the realist-psychological dimension of the ‘system’. At best, this drastically reduces the means by which the practice can be observed/conducted.

The Communist Censorship

In the Soviet Union, ideology was used as an instrument of indoctrination and utter political, social, and artistic control. Smeliansky considers Stanislavski’s legacy “perhaps the first victim” of the “great inner struggle against the pressure of ideology”

⁸ In Orthodox thought, the heart is “both the centre of the human being and the point of meeting between the human being and God”. It can be regarded as “the place of self-knowledge, where we see ourselves as we truly are”, as well as “the place of self-transcendence, where we understand our nature as a temple of the Holy Trinity [...] and where the image comes face to face with the Archetype” (Ware of Diokleia, 1986: 11). Moreover, as John Meyendorff suggests, for the Orthodox Faith, the name Jesus Christ, as in “the Name of the Incarnate Word, is bound up in the essential functions of being: it is present in the ‘heart’, it is linked to the breath” (1974: 38).

that marked the entire “history of Russian theatre” (Smeliansky, 1998: 49). Additionally, a self-censorship, aimed to eliminate any sensitive words/ideas that could have led to imprisonment or even execution, became more than necessary⁹.

During the Stalinist era, especially the years of terror - known in the Russian history as The Great Purge (1936-1938) - an estimate of 750.000 citizens were labelled ‘enemies of the people’, thus being found guilty of treason against the communist ideology/dictatorship and executed¹⁰. Not even a complete self-censorship could have guaranteed safety. Under Stalin, the entire population was subjected to constant governmental “surveillance”: everyone was “watched” and thus became a “subject on an unpredictable but large-scale bases to arrest, execution, and other forms of state violence” (Fitzpatrick, 2000: 190).

The communist elite was not sheltered from the terror for, as argued by David Brandenberger, “Unmasked as enemies of the people [...], many of the members of the new Soviet Olympus fell into disgrace or disappeared” completely, “taking with them an entire generation of bestsellers, textbooks, and popular drama for the stage and silver screen” (2011: 4). Alexander Solzhenitsyn remembers that the simple “arrest of a family

⁹ In 1931, Stanislavski’s editor, Lyubov Gurevich, warns him that “terms like ‘the life of the human spirit’, ‘the soul’, and ‘magic if’” [...] invite “Marxist scissors” because they invoke nonmaterial ideas (Carnicke, 2009: 101-2). “In 1936, Stanislavski received a letter from The Central Committee of the Communist Party criticizing terms such as [...] ‘the soul’, ‘intuition’ and ‘subconscious’ considering them ‘hazy’ and inappropriate” (Dybovskii in Carnicke, 2009, 102). Additionally, “a special committee was set up to verify Stanislavski’s writings from the point of view of the latest scientific advances” and the existing “correspondence with a party official, Aleksei Angarov, reveals the direction in which they tried to steer Stanislavski in this matter, [...] to unmask ‘his mystical terminology’” (Smeliansky in Stanislavski, 2010: 689).

¹⁰ Sheila Fitzpatrick defines “terror” as an “extra-legal state violence against groups and randomly chosen citizens”. According to her, apart from targeting mostly “kulaks”, “priests”, “private businessmen”, and later on “communist elite”, the ways in which victims were chosen during the Stalinist terror had a frightening “random element” in so far as “anybody could be exposed as an ‘enemy of the people’”. Moreover, not only the victims were suffering, but their families “usually shared in their stigmatization” (Fitzpatrick, 2000: 7).

member changed everything overnight”, endangering the rest of the family, regardless of how devoted to the communist cause they were (Solzhenitsyn in Fitzpatrick, 2000: 212).

Benedetti disagrees with the idea that Stanislavski was ever in any real danger. He asserts that the prosecution of “a man whose artistic ideas were being pressed into the service as a cornerstone of the state’s official policy” was, if not impossible, very difficult to pursue (Benedetti, 1999: 372). Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. Smeliansky urges us to remember that

As early as June 1930 one of his favourite nephews had been arrested. Neither his status as a “sacred cow” nor his pleas to the head of the secret police Heinrich Yagoda were of any help. Mikhail Alekseev died in jail. The only gesture of kindness that was made by the authorities was to hand his dead body over to his relatives. Other close relatives were arrested and K.S. took charge of their children. The word “concentration camp” appears for the first time in his letters to mean imminent death. (Smeliansky in Stanislavski 2010: 686)

He clearly finds the thought that “Stanislavski was in any way sheltered from the terror in his home as on a kind of island retreat” utterly incorrect (Ibid., 2010: 686).

From Spirituality to Realism

As it appears, in his quest for uncovering the mysteries of what Stanislavski defines as “the art of experiencing” (2010: 16), he often shifted his focus. From the earlier use of exterior resources (costume, make-up, imitating exterior behaviour), over the years, he relentlessly looked for new ways towards creating the life of the character as a living/breathing persona. He did so by thoroughly dissecting every artistic creation pursued, while constantly considering his own life experiences.

Not only that he tested recalling the memory of sensations/emotions and the logic of relying on concrete physical actions, but he also made use of his personal religious knowledge/feelings. In Vasily Toporkov’s opinion, the “shift from the search for inner feelings to the fulfilment of tasks is one of Stanislavski’s greatest discoveries

and solves one of the major problems we actors have” (Toporkov, 2008: 28). However, this change in his approach to acting is also inaccurately associated with a total dismissal of his earlier spiritual and emotional interest, in favour of a presumed later realist, scientific vision. Nevertheless, as Nicolai Demidov explains:

I worked with him side-by-side for some 30 years (mostly on theory and the practical techniques of an actor’s creative state onstage), lived directly next to him for a long time, and I can bear witness: in his essence, Stanislavsky never changed. He always strived for one thing (for one thing only!): he tried to find a way to truly live onstage—as the world’s greatest actors did in their finest moments. (2016: 141)

Christine Edwards argues in favour of a constant Stanislavskian “spiritual emphasis on the psychological background of realistic interpretation” (1966: 221). Alongside the visible and broadly accepted “superficially realistic” layer, a less evident but very powerful and highly “contagious alchemy of the spirit” was present. This alchemy inspired “an inner vision of plays and roles and a general method of spiritual” interpretation, more profound than the apparent psychological one (Edwards, 1966: 221).

As Bertolt Brecht puts it, with “a cool-headed appraisal” of Stanislavski’s vocabulary, the “mystical and cultish character” of ideas can be “brought to light”. Although his intent is to criticise this ‘cultish’ tendency, Brecht acknowledges at the same time that for Stanislavski, “the human soul appeared no different from what it is in a religion”, and that “there was a ‘priesthood’ of art, a ‘congregation’, a ‘captivated’ audience. ‘The word’ had something mystically absolute about it, and the actor was a ‘servant of art’” (Brecht and Mueller, 1964: 156).

Totally opposing such spiritual views, Sonia Moore argues against any mystical presence in Stanislavski’s work. For example, in her eagerness to defend the practicality of the ‘system’, Moore feels compelled to state repeatedly throughout her entire book

that “there is nothing mystical, there is no mysterious transformation in Stanislavski’s ‘reincarnation’”. According to Moore, the Stanislavskian actor should be able to control everything: “all his actions” and his entire stage existence (1960: 60-1).

Undoubtedly, she refers here to a superficial type of restraint that does not surpass the body, the physical action, the given circumstances of the play, or the lines of the character. It might be indeed about control; however, such restraint is not necessarily related only to the body but mostly to the ego or, to use Stanislavski’s own term, “the egotistic ‘I’”, that completely opposes the “creative ‘I’/soul”¹¹ (1967: 111). It is a self-mastery learned through years of meditation/spiritual training and by ways of maintaining what Stanislavski deems that a correct moral behaviour should be¹².

Demidov also finds the “morality of an artist’s emotional and volitive make-up” (2016: 75) utterly important and, thus, to be made an integral part of the actor’s curriculum¹³. It seems to me that neither Stanislavski nor Demidov shied away from

¹¹ In Stanislavski’s account, an artist has to strive towards a “liberation of his creative ‘I’ from the clutches of his egotistic ‘I’”, defined by “passionate, petty and spiteful impulses, vanity” or small egotistic cravings for fame and material gain (1967: 111). This creative ‘I’ can only be liberated by “the achievement of a state of complete self-control”, by the “awakening in himself” of “a taste for life in the quest of the beautiful”, and by “an inner experience of all contemporary life as the expression of the highest example of beauty” (Stanislavski, 1967: 111), that is to say, the beauty of God.

¹² Far from being perfect, it seems that Stanislavski constantly strived towards an ideal of moral human behaviour, as inspired by his religious feelings. Including his love life and “affections had to be bound up with a spiritual element”. Laurence Senelick thinks that Stanislavski “probably came to his marriage a virgin”, as demanded by the Orthodox moral norms (Senelick, 2014: 9-10). When “he became infatuated with the American dancer Isadora Duncan”, mesmerised by her artistic qualities rather than the physical appearance, Stanislavski only “cast her as a muse” and did not hesitate tactfully to deflect “her attempts to seduce him”. Moreover, when aware of the dancer’s immoral affair with “the millionaire Paris Singer”, Stanislavski “wrote her off as a potential artistic inspiration” (Senelick, 2014: 9-10).

¹³ In a note from 1926, Stanislavski acknowledges Demidov as “one of the few who knows the ‘system’ theoretically and practically” (Demidov, 2016: 1). As explained by Andrei Malaev-Babel, Demidov used “moral education for athletes” at the “St

using ‘morality’ and many other religious/mystical concepts. Yet, it is necessary to remember that, although the thought of staging mystery plays came to Stanislavski after attending one in Paris, his creative purpose was not at all religious¹⁴. In the end, he “never set out to create liturgical or any other type of ritual compositions for religious purposes” (Shevtsova, 2012: 6). That is to say, he did not use the art of the stage with a religious outcome in mind. Quite the opposite, Stanislavski seemed to have planted the seeds of a religious way of thinking/behaving into the artistic soil of the creative act.

By quoting one of Stanislavski’s letters, addressed to his wife Mariya Lilina and written only “three days after he had set out his need for moral education in his diary”, Benedetti points out Stanislavski’s personal view of the theatre, with its higher ideals and function. In this letter, he refers to “the artist” as “a prophet who appears on earth to bear witness to purity and truth” and “who must become an ideal man” (Benedetti, 1999: 37). In other words, in Stanislavski’s vision, there is a huge difference between a mere actor and an artist¹⁵. Moreover, let us remember that the “tradition of the Moscow Art Theatre has its roots in that of Shchepkin and Gogol”, who “saw the theatre as an

Petersburg Athletic Society” where “he developed and taught his own system of training” that included morality as an instrument of education (Demidov, 2016: 16).

¹⁴ In a letter dated 8 May 1897, from Paris, Stanislavski recalls attending a ‘mystery’ play – “‘Evangélie en 3 parties’ [...], organised for those who wish to pray and cleanse their souls”. He notes: “I wept at all three acts and left the theatre completely refreshed. [...] ‘Our Father’, set to the wonderful verses of Rostand and uttered in a whisper by Sarah amid a sobbing audience, —this is artistic in the highest degree” and “it moves one to tears”. He further expresses the desire “to stage this play...if only in a private home. Let those people who have lost their ability to pray in churches come to us and be inspired in the theatre” (Senelick, 2014: 76).

¹⁵ To achieve artistic greatness, the actor needs to strive relentlessly towards becoming this artist, who (according to Stanislavski) is a “superior being, with a quasi-religious responsibility in the expression of his art” and who should “sacrifice himself, to relate to the universal idea [...] of the general life in nature” (Benedetti, 2008: 16).

institution” that, like the church, was capable “of influencing the spiritual needs of [an] audience, of educating it toward a higher morality and ethics”¹⁶ (Gorchakov, 1973: 18).

Shevtsova envisions Stanislavski’s legacy as resulting from an intertwining of ideas generated by his Orthodox upbringing and those stemming from his early interest in yoga/Hinduism. As she asserts, “there is the interlacing of Orthodoxy and a component of Hinduism together with the secular preoccupations of making theatre” (2012: 6). Astonishingly, two apparently opposed spiritual practices, as in the Orthodox Faith and yoga, seem to go well hand in hand, for, as Shevtsova further notes, “Stanislavski’s adoption of the idea of prana for relaxation and breathing exercises” was not in conflict with, or contradicted in any way “his ingrained Orthodoxy”, which “was at the heart of his concern with the ‘life of the human spirit’” (Shevtsova, 2012: 5).

While it can be argued that Christian thought has no common ground with the yogic/Hindu philosophy and, as such, their beliefs/practices are often at odds, Stanislavski has no difficulties in finding them compatible. In fact, as explained by Walter Evans-Wentz, all these religious paths (that appear to be so different from each other) are much more connected than generally assumed. To support this statement, Evans-Wentz brings into argumentation the fact that the entire monastic history in the West, as well as the East, is almost indissoluble from the history of yoga:

When the early Christians, both Gnostic and non-Gnostic, dwelt in the desert and mountain solitudes of Egypt and the Near East as solitary hermits or in communities, [and] vowed to the three vows, of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they grafted into the tree of the Christian Faith a form of *yoga* which appears to have had sources both in the monasticism of the ancient

¹⁶ The Russian Orthodox Church largely tolerated the art of the theatre as another possible path towards theosis/deification. Although under the strict control of the church, before the 1917 Revolution, the Russian artist became the moral leader of the entire nation. As Orlando Figes asserts, “nowhere has the artist been more burdened with the task of moral leadership and national prophecy, nor more feared and persecuted by the state” (2002: xxvii).

Egyptian priests and in that of the early Zoroastrians and Hindus. (Evans-Wentz, 1965: 35-6)

Furthermore, “Eastern meditation influenced Christian mysticism through the gateways of Alexandria and Neoplatonism and the influence was retained and handed down through the ages” (Dumoulin, 1974: 62-3). As John Meyendorff asserts, “the monks of the Christian East learned to use Neoplatonic language in their treatises on Orthodox spirituality (1974: 23). There are many more similarities between the Buddhist/yogic/Hindu thought and Christianity, especially in their mystical forms. According to Heinrich Dumoulin, “the entire way of higher meditation in Christianity and Zen Buddhism glows with the fervour of mysticism” (1974: 19).

It seems to me that there is still a gap in the writings on Stanislavski’s legacy; most of the studies have focused only on his fascination with yogic/Hindu thought, while the Orthodox Faith—with which he grew up and matured, and that constituted an equally powerful presence in his life—is mostly ignored. Yet, we should take into consideration Stanislavski’s constant tendency to talk about the spirit/soul/creative ‘I’ of the artist. The definition of the word ‘spirit’ (*dukh*) in his lifetime, as noted by Rose Whyman, did not necessarily have religious connotations. However, as she further explains, Stanislavski’s way of talking about acting undoubtedly connects the stage with his religious upbringing and beliefs (2008: 76).

Smeliansky’s idea of a religious conversion appears to be endorsed by Stanislavski’s constant use of such Orthodox notions as “heart” (1967: 224), “love” (1967: 116), and “beauty” (1967: 139), or climbing a spiritual “ladder” (1967: 93). In order to grasp this conversion, it seemed only logical for me to address these religious feelings, and a first step was to look into Stanislavski’s Orthodox upbringing and early “strict religious education” (Magarshack, 1986: 3) as the source of inspiration for the use of such religious concepts.

Orthodox Roots

To highlight the strong ties with Orthodox thought and traditions, it is imperative to remember that, as members of the merchant Muscovite society, Stanislavski's family followed the old Orthodox tradition. During the formative years, he was surrounded by a religious/spiritual way of thinking, as well as by his father's credo that a good Christian has to dedicate his existence and work to the benefit of others. Born Alekseev, Stanislavski appears to be a believer in God and the soul. Most of his personal letters abound in references to God as part of his daily language, such as "thank God" (Senelick, 2014: 23); "My God" (Senelick, 2014: 49); "if God takes away" or "gifts God has given me" (Senelick, 2014: 53).

Like the rest of his family (at least before 1917), he was an active Christian. As asserted by Magarshack, Stanislavski was raised and educated in a patriarchal life-style, in which "certain patriarchal customs were still observed: all church holidays and fasts were strictly kept" and "the whole family went to church regularly" (Magarshack, 1986: 3). Nonetheless, although brought up in Moscow, in a strong Orthodox moral environment, Stanislavski chose his own path and boldly reinvented himself.

As a way of hiding his performing activities from his father, to whom the thought "that his son harboured ambitions to become a professional actor" was purely "unthinkable" (Benedetti, 1999: 21), Konstantin Alekseev took the stage name Stanislavski. All his theatrical research had a single purpose: to guide the actor towards becoming, as much as it was humanly possible, an ideal artist. According to him, "this ideal human being/actor" can only devote "himself to one single great goal in his life", that is "to make plain the hidden spiritual beauties which a masterly work of art contains" (Stanislavski, 2010: 314).

It is critical to note that, in the nineteenth century, the Russians' life from birth till death abounded in various religious rituals. For example, when baptized, a child would have been given a saint's name, and the importance of that saint's yearly celebration day (known as the name day) had a higher significance than the actual birthday, being connected with the day of their baptism¹⁷. The very goal of Orthodox spirituality "is the attainment of union with God and consequently theosis or deification" (Coniaris, 1998: 132), pursuable only with the help of God's grace that becomes accessible through the baptismal ritual.

Before the Revolution, all the major events in the Russian people's lives, such as buying a property, joining the army, or starting school/university used to be blessed by a priest. Clearly, Stanislavski was no exception. As Benedetti points out, including when the Moscow Art Theatre had its first rehearsal day in Pushkino, a small village situated near Moscow, "a short religious opening ceremony" took place¹⁸ (1999: 67). Furthermore, considering that the birth of a theatre was a major event, its legitimacy had to be acknowledged by the church. According to Whyman, the Metropolitan blessed the official opening of the Moscow Art Theatre, and Stanislavski himself led the actors in prayers (Whyman, 2008: 76). Might this grand opening religious ceremony in Moscow

¹⁷ The meaning of the holy baptism for the Orthodox people is not associated solely with the entrance of the newly born child into the Holy Church. More significant is the fact that it marks the possibility to access the inner grace of God, and thus, to begin a personal journey towards theosis, central to Orthodox theology.

¹⁸ In a letter written by Vsevolod Meyerhold on 17 June 1898, he names the venue in Pushkino "our temple of Melpomene" and informs that, upon their arrival, "everything was ready for the ceremony [...]. There was a table in the auditorium, covered with a white cloth [...], icons, water, and everything needed [...]" (Meyerhold in Benedetti, 1991: 21). All these are objects used to build an improvised altar: the white cloth signifying the purity of the place, the water being the holy water, and icons as in holy objects intended to bring the sacredness of the church into the space of rehearsals. For the Orthodox people, the icon represents a symbol and a link between the worshiper's spiritual emotions and the Holy Spirit. As Figes asserts, the Orthodox Faith considers the icon to be "a gateway to the holy sphere" (2002: 299).

(or the simple blessing in Pushkino) have had a similar significance to that of a holy baptism, during which the work of this newly formed theatre would have been blessed with grace?

Stanislavski could not have been a stranger to all these Orthodox spiritual norms of life, for he simply lived them all. Religious thought, the Orthodox Church, religious celebrations and daily prayers were constantly present both in his personal and professional life. Later on, when married and with children, he continues to go to church. In a letter addressed to his wife, written on 3rd May 1896, Stanislavski gives an account of his day: “since yesterday was a public holiday, I got up about 12. The house was empty. Where should I go? I thought and thought, went to mass, attended prayers at the Three Joys” (Senelick, 2014: 67).

He also appears intent to continue this tradition with his children, as proved by a Will written on 17 April 1893. In this document, he asserts that, in the event of his death, it is his utmost desire that his daughter Kira be religiously educated. “Bend every effort”, he writes, “to make her religious, since only in that manner can one preserve the poetry in life and a sense of higher things” (Senelick, 2014: 59). He urges the beneficiary of this Will to teach Kira ‘that the goal of life lies not in hedonism, wealth and pleasures, but in serious work and the beauty that elevates the soul’ (Ibid, 2014: 60).

Although it can be argued that the spiritual examples noted above only reflect Stanislavski’s personal life, in my opinion, this is contradicted by his own lack of delineation between professional and personal. His unwavering passion for the theatre, as a “temple of art” (Stanislavski, 1967: 95) was a constant beacon to him, both personally and professionally. Obviously, everything that he learned/experienced, in his quest of a lifetime, was given to the stage and represented Stanislavski’s highest

offerings for the benefit of humankind. In that respect, he might have followed the Orthodox hesychastic advice to lead a spiritual life in the context of his calling¹⁹.

A “practice of silence”, the ancient hesychastic way “teaches inner silence” by which “body and mind are brought to solitude and quietness in order to experience the peace and silence that surround the presence of God” (Coniaris, 1998: 216). By means of renunciation, by silencing the mind and heart, as well as by consciously and ceaselessly surrendering his ego to God, the monk gains access to his own divine nature through the prayer of the heart²⁰.

While Stanislavski does not use directly the example of this prayer, Demidov refers to it (in relation to the ‘system’) as a method of meditational breathing, “a prayer with the mind in the heart” during which “the in-breath” covers the words “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God...” and “the out-breath: ‘have mercy on me’”. As Demidov further explains, “taking in God’s name and then breathing it out, you don’t quite exhale all the way out—part of it stays in you and is *digested*” (2016: 707).

Bearing in mind the Orthodox upbringing and his family’s traditional way of life, it can be assumed that Stanislavski was also a believer in the necessary spiritual growth of the human being. After 1917, however, under the new communist regime, such religious credos could no longer be expressed publicly. As Whyman explains, it is very hard to tell if he “maintained Russian Orthodox faith throughout his life, secretly,

¹⁹ Hesychasm, known as “the method of interior or spiritual prayer” (Lossky V, 1973: 209), constitutes a major part of the ancient ascetic heritage of the Orthodox Faith. Whereas much older, its wisdom was written in a treatise attributed to St. Symeon the New Theologian, dating from the early eleventh century. Famous Russian monasteries such as Optina Pustyn returned “to the hesychastic path of Russia’s most revered medieval monks” and became places often visited by “all the greatest writers of the nineteenth century—Gogol, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy among them” (Figes, 2002: 292).

²⁰ The words “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Rossi, 2010: 1) are silently and continuously repeated during the Hesychastic meditative prayer.

as many Russians did after the revolution” (Whyman, 2008: 78). Yet, taking into account that his religious feelings and sense of spirituality were nurtured during more than half of his life, it seems highly unlikely that any type of social or political upheaval (such as the one generated by the communist-foisted atheist ideology) could have completely erased Stanislavski’s spiritual consciousness. In fact, he felt quite distant “from Soviet values” (Carnicke, 2009: 96) and held no interest in any politics. As argued by Senelick, Stanislavski “was not political”. Before “the Revolution, he was a loyal subject of the Tsar and his interest in affairs of state mattered only insofar as they affected his factory, his theatre and the lives of his nearest and dearest”. As for “his liberal views”, indubitably they “never exceeded those characteristic of his class” (Senelick, 2014: 8).

Spirituality and the ‘system’

Because written evidence that could explain Stanislavski’s constant use of Orthodox concepts and their hidden meaning is yet to be discovered, there is no way to prove, apart from his early strict religious upbringing and education, that he had in-depth knowledge of Orthodox theological thought. However, bearing in mind that he was an active Orthodox believer for more than half of his life (he was in his 40s at the time of the Revolution), this constant and relentless use of such religious ideas is too obvious to be viewed as a simple coincidence, and thus seems intentionally disregarded. Still, I had to ask myself: How can the English practitioner be made aware of and understand a possible Orthodox interpretation of the ‘system’?

According to Mircea Eliade, it is not an easy matter to grasp either a religious or a “cultural phenomenon” that “is alien to one’s own ideological pattern” (1978: 11). As Eliade further explains, “there is, indeed only one way” to make sense of such a phenomenon, and that is “to place oneself at its very centre and from there to track

down all the values that radiate from it” (1978: 11). In the light of Eliade’s advice, it becomes crucial to grasp the spiritual values of the times in which Stanislavski grew up, matured, and developed his acting technique.

Whereas “he was writing in Soviet Russia at a time when anything esoteric was heavily suppressed”, spirituality appears to be in a very close partnership with inspiration, for “it crops up in Stanislavski’s work with astonishing regularity” (Merlin, 2007: 46-7). This spiritual presence was inherent, “cultivated by the atmosphere in [the] theatre and the years of training” (Merlin, 2003: 35). Stanislavski makes use of the word ‘spiritual’ over and over again in many of his letters and writings. He often uses expressions such as “the spiritual needs of a superior intelligence” (Senelick, 2014: 331), “spiritual resources” (Stanislavski, 1967: 100), “spiritual powers” (Stanislavski, 1967: 102), “spiritual nature” (Senelick, 2014: 447), “spiritual treasures” (Stanislavski, 1967: 110), or “spiritual education” (Stanislavski, 1967: 114). Yet, he does not give an explanation of the term.

The Russian Orthodox philosopher Georgy Petrovich Fedotov, for example, asserts that in its broadest sense, the term ‘spirituality’ expounds the moral and intellectual qualities of people in their relation to themselves, to others, to nature and, ultimately, to God (1981: 1). It can be concluded that ‘spirituality’ does not necessarily imply a religious path, following a specific dogma, but recognises the presence of a higher power that bears many names, as in God, Allah, Yahweh, Ishvara, or Brahman. In addition, as Anthony Coniaris states, for Orthodox people the religious sense of the word ‘spirituality’ is to be filled with “God’s grace”, the “Holy Spirit”, granted to all through baptism (1998: 27). As a way to evolve, a believer can be transformed in body, mind, and soul, by means of grace and personal effort.

Although, religiously speaking, “spirituality implies growth toward maturity in Christ”, in the opinion of Pseudo Macarius, as cited by Coniaris, “to be spiritual” also means “to keep growing in love and understanding” of other people (Coniaris, 1998: 27). Moreover, the Orthodox idea of leading a spiritual life is not at all abstract. Actually, it can be as practical and as concrete as possible, and it is reflected in the good deeds (actions) of the believer.

This Orthodox spiritual practicality could explain Stanislavski’s ease in finding a practical way towards a ‘spiritual’ type of artistic creation for the art of the stage, by bringing together the physical actions of the body with the spiritual actions of the mind and the soul. He uses the Orthodox idea of climbing a spiritual ladder towards deification, translated into a continuous effort that the actor should employ to reach “that point of perfection in the creative art of the stage”²¹ (Stanislavski, 1967: 93).

In Stanislavski’s account, all the “steps of the ladder leading from a very ordinary and simple movement across the room to the highest efforts of self-sacrifice” need to be learned, understood, and transmuted “into living images” that are reflected “in truthful and correct physical action” (1967: 93). He clearly mirrors here the Orthodox concept of ‘spirituality’, which “is not mere perfectionism (‘I have arrived! I have made it!’)”. On the contrary, it can only be “a never-ending process of climbing and growth leading to new levels of God and holiness” (Coniaris, 1998: 189-90).

²¹ The notion of ascension on a heavenly ladder was introduced in Orthodox thought sometime at the beginning of the seventh century by St. John Scholasticus, a famous abbot of the Mount Sinai Monastery, known as Climacus after writing the *Klimax* (*The Ladder*). One of the most significant Orthodox works on theosis, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is a guide containing various spiritual exercises/advice. To emphasise the number of years Jesus lived until his Baptism, the Orthodox ladder contains thirty steps. It is reminiscent of Jacob’s dream of a ladder, extending from earth to heaven, but, as Coniaris argues, it is also the symbol of Christ, as in “the mystic ladder”, the gift of God, revealing the ways towards spiritual transcendence (1998: 190).

Furthermore, in Stanislavski's opinion, not only does the actor climb this symbolic ladder for, indirectly, by witnessing the artistic creation, so too does the spectator. The artist, according to Stanislavski, cannot and "must not imitate" the "spectator". Just the opposite, the artist "must lead him up the rungs of a great ladder" while helping to "open his eyes to ideals" (Gorchakov, 1973: 2).

'Love', 'Beauty' and 'Truth'

For both Stanislavski's art and the Orthodox Faith, spirituality appears to be anchored in 'love' and 'beauty', two major concepts mirroring God's love and beauty. According to Orthodox thought, "God is love; but He is also the source of all that is truly beautiful. Beauty is the outer expression of God's resplendent Glory" (Coniaris, 1998: 11). The real purpose of life is understood as a continuous journey that seeks a spiritual transformation through love and "the attainment of the grace of the Holy Spirit" (Berdyayev in Lossky N, 1952: 1), while beauty is the measure of this transformation.

In his lectures at the Opera Studio, Stanislavski appears to stress a "passion for beauty" that is crucial in establishing the correct "atmosphere of the studio" during training (Stanislavski, 1967: 139). A teacher of acting, in Stanislavski's account, should be "a flame of unquenchable love... Love is sacred just because its fire is never quenched, however large the number of hearts it kindles" (Stanislavski, 1967: 116).

'Love', 'beauty', and 'truth' are the three Orthodox pillars on which Stanislavski based his entire legacy. In his thinking, only "truth and love" can introduce an actor "into the rhythm of art's whole life" (1967: 116). Although 'truth' appears to be the least abstract concept of these three, unfortunately, it is also the most misunderstood one. In both Stanislavski and Demidov's opinions, "truth is art": it is "the way of the art of experiencing". As Demidov asserts, "there are so many arguments and misinterpretations around this word: *truth*" (2016: 44). And he further argues that

Stanislavski “always wanted to see only one thing onstage—genuine sincerity and boundless truth, i.e. *life* onstage or, to put it another way, *process*, not *results*” (Ibid.: 140). Yet, as Demidov muses, “it’s so strange” that “because this achievement is considered to be easy, simple, and self-evident”, the process itself appears to be “what is almost always missed” (Ibid.: 140). Many actors seem to think: “Of course, authenticity! Of course, sincerity! What else can it be? I always strive for this!” (Ibid.: 141). However, as Demidov continues to explain, such actors cannot be further away from understanding Stanislavski’s truth:

I’ll say the following, leaning on the bitter experience of a teacher and a director: whoever says this and thinks that to himself, typically has no idea, can’t even imagine, what ‘truth’ Stanislavski is talking about. It isn’t ‘self-evident’ at all, you have to search for it, search some more, and keep on searching! (Ibid.: 140-1)

This truth can only be unleashed if, by means of experiencing, the actor learns how to allow her inner nature (soul) to take over. Moreover, “a perfect work” of art “happens only when a master artist imbues it with his soul” and thus “he melds with it” (Ibid.: 44). Only this melding of the soul of the artist with the soul of the creation itself can transform the created object or—in the case of the actor, the created character—into a natural and truthful living art.

Conclusion

Clearly, after decades of translating, transmitting, and reinterpreting Stanislavski’s legacy, somehow so much of his practical work still remains a mystery. With the probable exception of the Russians, the rest of the practitioners are limited to understanding and consequently using only its superficial layers, devoid of the spiritual perspective, crucial for experiencing the creative state. Nevertheless, in order to transform into an artist, alongside the physical and psychological necessary preparation,

the actor might need also to submit to a thorough “spiritual preparation” that allows “to avoid falling into the trap of mechanical, habitual acting” (Whyman, 2008: 76).

“Leave your ego at the stage door as you come in”, Stanislavski urges the artist (Benedetti, 1999: 149). If the actor is ever to grow artistically and spiritually, inevitably, first and foremost, she has to learn how to let go of her own egotistical desires and to cultivate precious spiritual values. Sadly, as assessed by Benjamin Spock, such values seem to be, generally speaking, less and less important in the twenty-first century. During his interview with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Spock highlights the fact that today, the idea of spirituality, unfortunately, is no longer “stylish”:

‘What is that?’ people say. Spirituality, to me, means the nonmaterial things [...] like love, and helpfulness and tolerance, and enjoyment of the arts or even creativity of the arts. It takes a high degree and a high type of spirituality to want to express things in terms of literature or poetry, plays, [...] creating beauty any way. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: 229-30)

Not necessarily religious in their essence, the nonmaterial things recognised by Spock as inseparable from his personal sense of spirituality can also be traced back to the values embedded in the Orthodox religious path, being as well very similar with Stanislavski’s own highly cherished nonmaterial things. The pursuit of such universal values leads to a spiritual growth, critical for the development of a mature, strong, and accomplished personality. It might be that, for this reason, the journey of a Stanislavskian actor cannot and should not be orientated solely towards developing her technique/craft. Whilst the training aims for the acquisition of this technique, it also provides an initial support for self-scrutiny and self-acceptance. As such, training can open up a door towards the much-needed spiritually/religiously inspired ways of preparation, crucial for the internal make-up of an artist, as envisioned by Stanislavski.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my wonderful supervisor, Professor Maria Shevtsova, for her relentless patience and constant guidance, as well as for her many personal sacrifices made during difficult times of medical struggle. I will never be able to find appropriate words in order to express my profound gratitude and appreciation for all her help. I am more than aware that without this help, my entire practice as research (from which this article was extracted) would have never been accomplished.

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